

The Christian News-Letter

Edited by
J. H. OLDHAM

No. 114

DECEMBER 31ST, 1941

DEAR MEMBER,

Amid the destructive fury which rages around us we have to watch for things that remind us of our common humanity. A notable example is what has been done by the European Student Relief Fund,¹ on behalf of European students of all nationalities who are prisoners of war. The common human desire for knowledge has called into existence an international enterprise which, like the Red Cross, serves disinterestedly those belonging to warring nations. What has been achieved in camps for prisoners of war is, moreover, like similar efforts in the camps for refugees in this country, a striking evidence of the power of the human spirit to triumph over adverse circumstances and the temptation in prolonged captivity to intellectual and spiritual lethargy.

UNIVERSITIES OF CAPTIVITY

The great bulk of the prisoners of war have been, of course, in Germany. The story of the "universities of captivity" is of exceptional interest. The initiative was taken by the prisoners themselves long before any contact with the outside world could be established. Without books or papers, rooms in which to meet or even chairs to sit on, little groups of men squatting on the ground in the open air listened to lectures prepared under great difficulties by fellow-prisoners who in peace time had been university professors or lecturers. The German authorities, realizing the value of intellectual study for maintaining moral, made provision of a room and allowed prisoners to buy in Germany the bare beginnings of a library. French books were desperately needed, and when contact was made between the camps and the European Student Relief Fund, text books began to arrive and new courses of study were made possible. The spirit of these miniature universities is one of comradeship and free exchange. Everyone is a professor who has something to teach and everyone a student who wants to learn. The subjects studied depend on the facilities which chance provides. One prison camp is a flourishing law school, thanks to the presence of an eminent professor of law. Others specialise in philosophy, history, literature or languages.

As soon as permission was obtained, members of the staff of ESRF visited the camps to discover their needs. These visits were for many prisoners their first contact with the outside world, and their psychological value was at least as great as their practical outcome. Books and courses of study began to arrive and research students were in some cases enabled to continue their work. Universities in Switzerland and France have "adopted" some of these universities of captivity, and if suitable conditions for holding examinations can be devised it may even prove possible to grant degrees.

For British prisoners the work is more difficult, since they are scattered throughout Germany. Contact has already been established with individual students and some groups and many textbooks have been sent, but more are needed.²

¹ Representing International Student Service, The World Student Christian Federation and Pax Romana (the international federation of Roman Catholic students).

² University text books on any subject will be gratefully received by International Student Service at 35 Beaumont Street, Oxford, provided that they are in current use and are unmarked.

A FRESH APPROACH TO CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

Among the many letters about the Supplement bearing this title (C.N-L. No. 108) is one from a member who has taught in several different types of school, calling attention to the practical problems which arise in the school. The letter says:

"I have been discussing the Supplement with a group of teachers and others interested in this knotty problem. We were in general agreement that this is the line of attack that is needed, but we wondered whether you have given sufficient weight to the fact that society and its problems are *within* as well as *around* the school. It is quite true that the teaching of religious knowledge only becomes relevant when there exists in society a body of generally accepted principles and standards which accord with it. But the average school staff is as divided and unsure on the nature of these principles and standards as society outside the school, and in particular there are sharp differences in fundamental educational assumptions between teachers who are convinced Christians and teachers who are convinced humanists."

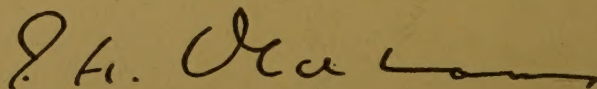
"OUR FATHER"

For those who believe that the reality of life is found in relationship (Supplement No. 112), and that it is God, the living Spirit, who gives meaning to relationship (Supplement No. 114), response to God is the mainspring of life. All living, that it is to say, is essentially a prayer; the central attitude, quest and bent of the whole being is an acknowledgment of dependence on God and a response to His will. The repetition of prayers, individual or corporate, may easily, and too often does, become formal and trivial. As such it was denounced by Christ as a pagan practice. The only Christian prayer is a fundamental habit of the heart and an offering of the whole life. But when the ultimate choice has been made, the life of relation finds spontaneous expression in spoken prayer and common worship.

The world war has involved the whole of mankind in a common need and in every land there rise from the lips of those who have learned to believe in God through Christ the words "Our Father." Where that prayer is uttered with the whole undivided being, *doing* inevitably follows—the doing that is the only real deed, since it is God's will that is done in and through us.

Opportunities of joining in such prayer with our fellow-Christians throughout the world are offered us in the opening month of the new year. For nearly a century Christians in many countries have been in the habit of uniting in the first week of January at the invitation of the World's Evangelical Alliance in a "Universal Week of Prayer."¹ The dates in 1942 are January 4-11. More recently there has come into existence a more comprehensive movement, embracing Roman Catholics, Orthodox and Protestants, for the observance of the octave of January 18-25 as a "Week of Prayer for Christian Unity,"² with which the World Conference on Faith and Order has associated itself.

Yours sincerely,



¹ Invitation and suggested topics from the World's Evangelical Alliance, 19 Russell Square, London, W.C.1. 1½d. post free.

² Leaflet with headings for prayer and collects from the Secretary, Mission House, Marston Street, Oxford.

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THE CHRISTIAN NEWS - LETTER

DECEMBER 31ST 1941



Supplement to

C.N.-L. No. 114

SUPERMAN OR SON OF GOD?

There was published this year in America a volume on Nietzsche,¹ which is the fruit of a decade of concentrated study and a comprehensive and masterly exposition of his thought. It is inspired by the conviction that the teaching of Nietzsche is in a peculiar degree relevant to the world of to-day. His predicament is our predicament, his problems are our problems. Though he belongs to a past generation, his "thought is terribly alive in the agonies of our time."

The account of Nietzsche in this Supplement is based almost entirely on Dr. Morgan's volume and the extensive quotations from Nietzsche's writings which it contains.

"GOD IS DEAD"

The pre-eminent significance of Nietzsche for both Christians and non-Christians lies in the candour and courage with which he faced the consequences of the loss of belief in God. Awareness of the spiritual crisis was, of course, a common characteristic of much of the thought of the nineteenth century. But no one was more uncompromising and relentless in following out the issue. Atheism was the major premise of Nietzsche's philosophy. He saw clearly that the conviction that "God is dead," represents a catastrophic historical experience. It is the knell of civilisation. Something on which men have lived for centuries has vanished. The human lot has no longer any meaning.

If God is dead, the basis of absolute truth and morals disappears. For fundamental truths there must now be substituted fundamental probabilities, but strong men are able to live by hypotheses without becoming weak or indecisive. Similarly in the field of morals the conscience can no longer claim to be an oracle of living truth. Our attitude in philosophy and ethics can be only an experimental one. There is no goal in life, no cosmic purpose which we can help to realise. "The strongest force no longer knows *what for*." Fact and value, the world as it is and the world as it ought to be, are utterly irreconcilable. In consequence of this destruction of

all values our civilisation will undergo a period of rupture, downfall and revolution, an eclipse of the sun unlike anything known on earth.

To guide mankind through this crisis became the dominant purpose of Nietzsche's life and thought. His one task was to root out all remnants of the exploded belief and to rebuild on a new basis a higher form of existence that would justify the loss of the old. He says of himself that he has never been ambitious of fame, but that he finds it unbearable "not to be occupied and grown together" with what seems to him most momentous in the world.

To this task he devoted himself with the utmost singleness and integrity of purpose. He scorned all half-hearted attempts to buttress up a faith that had inwardly collapsed. He would make no compromises with "the will to believe in what comforts us." He was repelled by the insincerity of Christians who cling to the traditional faith and lead a worldly life. It was, in fact, the scrupulousness and sincerity which sprang from Christian piety that seemed to him to forbid us to be any longer Christians and compel us to embrace radical atheism.

THE SUPERMAN

If God is dead, nothing remains except that man himself by a titanic effort and infinite heroism should impose on the world a meaning and value and *make* life something to which he can with his whole being say "Yes." For that reason the goal of all endeavour must be the coming into existence of the superman. The superman is "the meaning of the earth," the aim of humanity. In him life reaches its perfection; existence is transfigured. He becomes "the everlasting Yes to all things." Here, in the coming of the superman, Nietzsche discovers a goal for life, "a great and comprehensive hope." Humanity learns to give itself a purpose. It restores a meaning to a meaningless universe by learning to live for a cause great enough to justify everything. "To create a being

¹ *What Nietzsche Means*. By G. A. Morgan. (Harvard University Press)

higher than we ourselves are, is *our* being. *Create beyond ourselves.*"

Nietzsche's determination to conceive life grandly and to meet its demands without reserve had a religious quality. He accepted his mission with superb courage and stern discipline. No matter what life may bring, the brave man will say "Yes" to it. Truth is essentially a matter of courage. It is always a question how much truth a mind will *dare*. The true philosopher must risk himself incessantly. The more spiritual men become, the more they will experience the most painful tragedies. They reverence life, because it offers them the greatest oppositions. What the strong desire, because they know their own valour, is a *great* enemy. Do we not know, he indignantly asks, that it is the discipline of suffering, of *great* suffering, that has produced all the enhancements of man's life?

Nietzsche's insistence on self-realisation and the will to power is far removed from crude self-aggrandisement or easy self-indulgence. It is their highest, noblest self—something immeasurably above what they ordinarily take for their self—that men are to realise, and this cannot be achieved except at great cost. The will to power is a will to grow. Life has to become dangerous. It must be an arduous struggle towards unattained heights, an unending adventure of "self-overcoming." It involves a stern asceticism, a severe discipline, an irrepressible audacity. Tremendous vitality implies tremendous self-mastery. Better that humanity should perish altogether than that man should refuse to scale the heights.

Nietzsche's relentless honesty in facing the tragic consequences of the belief that God is dead, and the spiritual courage with which he wrestled with a world that knows nothing greater or higher than man, can hardly be surpassed. His imperishable service is that he has explored to the furthest limits what it means for man to be alone in the universe—a universe which has no value or meaning except what by superhuman heroism and suffering he puts into it. He was aware that the death of God brought to man a deeper loneliness than he has ever known. "For all those," he wrote, "who somehow had a 'God' for company, what *I* know as solitude did not exist." Man is left alone with a world into which he has himself *put* meaning and value. He does not find them there. As he reaches out to the world, he finds no answering echo, no welcoming response.

If Nietzsche is the enemy of Christianity he is a foeman whom we must respect. He has had the courage to strip away all disguises. If we want to know what atheism really means, we must sit at his feet. Scorning, as Christ also scorned, the half and half life, refusing every compromise, Nietzsche insisted that the question of God's existence should be posed and faced in its nakedness and all its bitter consequences.

THE QUESTION OF HUMAN EXISTENCE

The questions which Nietzsche raises are the concern of every man. They are not academic questions to be debated by philosophers and theologians, but touch life at its core. No one has had greater influence than Nietzsche in bringing about the shift of interest from problems of thought to the problem of existence. His philosophy is a philosophy of life. It is not a question of whether the Christian ethic or the ethic of Nietzsche is the higher. We miss the point when from Christian or humanitarian presuppositions we condemn Nietzsche's ethical teaching. If life is wholly meaningless except in so far as men by heroic effort put meaning into it and *give* it a goal, the superman must be uncompromising and ruthless in the pursuit of his aims. Pity is weakness and treason. Compassion is the last temptation which the strong have to overcome. The fundamental question is not one of ethics but of fact—the question of the nature of the universe and of man. Nietzsche bids men face without quailing the terrifying problem of their own existence.

In the preceding Supplement there was outlined an understanding of man's existence which is fundamentally opposed to that of Nietzsche, and the question is which is true. We cannot here argue the truth of either view. We can only try to understand the depth of the opposition and the consequences which follow from each.

LIFE AS RELATIONSHIP

If all real life is relationship, then the will to power, even in its most spiritual interpretation, leads not to the apotheosis but to the annihilation of man. If the true nature of man is such that it can find fulfilment only in fellowship, every attempt of the individual in isolation to obtain mastery over things and subdue the vast impersonal forces of the universe to his will can only

have the effect of emptying him of his humanity and making him merely a force among the forces which he supposes he controls. The career of a Napoleon or a Hitler may prove to be only the "senseless semblance of a fulfilment"—a seeming appropriation of the world at the price of ceasing to be a person and forfeiting his true self.

The secret of life in this view is not mastery but fidelity. Its meaning is found in the giving and receiving of relationship. "He who loves not, *lives* not." The ultimate truth of things is Spirit; and spirit, as we saw a fortnight ago, does not exist in the solitary individual confronting a dead world of things, but lives only in the act of communication between persons.

We have to be just as much in deadly earnest about the implications and consequences of this view that the reality and meaning of life are found in relationship, as Nietzsche was about his conviction that God is dead and that all that remains is the human will to power.

How is it that persons can make on us an unconditional demand, so that men are ready to give even their lives for their friends? Merely as belonging to the order of nature they can make no such absolute claim on us. Is not the only explanation of the unlimited devotion which we owe to other men that when we enter into communication with them as persons and respond to the claims they make on us we are somehow in touch with the eternal? In each human "Thou" that speaks to us we are aware, as Buber says, of a breath from the eternal "Thou"; in every human being to whom we make a full personal response we address the eternal "Thou." We are reminded once again of the words of Christ with their infinitude of meaning: "Inasmuch as ye did it unto one of these my brethren, even these least, ye did it unto Me".

The more we reflect on human relations the more evident it becomes that they are tainted with transiency. Every human "Thou" that meets us in intimate personal intercourse is fated, as we saw, to pass over into a "He" or "She,"—to become again part of the world of things, which we experience, reflect upon and use. Over every relation between human persons hangs the inexorable sword of separation. Every

contact with a human "Thou" is fleeting and incomplete. God alone is a "Thou" that never becomes an "It." He is the Person who never becomes a thing.

Many of our perplexities about God come from thinking of Him as part of the world. He cannot be fitted into the world of "It." He is not an object among other objects. If we look for Him there, we shall never find Him. We shall be forced to the conclusion that God is dead.

But it is quite otherwise when we seek to approach Him and respond to Him as a Person. For those who know life as relation God is not dead. He is the living Presence to whom we respond when we give ourselves to our fellow-men and surrender ourselves to an unconditional demand. If God is the "Thou" that can never become an "It," we cannot, except indirectly, speak about Him; we can only respond to Him. We can give ourselves to Him. We can trust Him. He meets us in our common life and lays on us a commission; in the acceptance and fulfilment of the commission God is known.

Even the man who abhors the name of God and believes himself to be godless, and yet goes out to meet life with the surrender of his whole being, may without knowing it be addressing God and responding unawares to His call. In the parable of the Last Judgment Christ plainly taught that there will be those in heaven who served God on earth and never knew it.

SELF-WILL AND FREEDOM

The contrast between the two ways of understanding life may be looked at from another angle. The man who knows nothing of the reality of relation, but only the world of things and his own feverish desire to make it serve his purposes, is able to think only in terms of his self-chosen ends and the means by which they can be accomplished. His life is cluttered up with a diversity of purposes, all of his own devising. He imagines that he is free, but he has only a will that is controlled by things and by his own instincts and desires. He goes out to conquer the world only to find that it meets him in the end as inexorable and relentless fate. His arbitrary self-will is sooner or later overborne by forces too vast for his puny strength.¹

But for the man who understands life as

¹ This paragraph is a description of a general attitude and is not intended as a direct criticism of Nietzsche. His philosophy has too many aspects for justice to be done to it in a single paragraph.

relationship the world in which he moves is not cold and alien; it is full of the reality of companionship. He believes that as his hands reach out towards the world, they meet hands that grip them. He knows that his *destiny* awaits him, and he goes out to meet it. He does not know where it will be found, but he knows that he must go out to seek it with his whole being. He has to wrestle with the intractable nature of things, but he knows that the wrestling has a meaning—not a meaning which he has to put into it, but a meaning which he can find because it is already there. However difficult the tasks, he is living in a friendly universe in which Spirit answers to spirit. His work is hallowed by human fellowship and the service of men, and becomes significant as an offering to the ever-present, eternal "Thou." His task is not to impose his will on a recalcitrant world of things, but to respond to a call that comes to him; to go forth to *meet*, and to that which meets him he answers in responsible decision and so fulfils his destiny.

The profound distinction which Buber here makes between "fate" and "destiny" depends, of course, on the meaning which is given to the latter word. It can be used in many senses. It is often on the lips of Hitler, and can be made to bear an opposite meaning to that intended here. If God is dead, no distinction remains between fate and destiny. But if the ultimate reality is Spirit, destiny may be given its proper meaning as that which is designed, appointed and ordained, with the knowledge that what is thus ordained is the expression of what in our imperfect human language can most adequately be described as a Father's love. To go out fearlessly to meet and fulfil our destiny means, in the language of St. Paul, to "prove what is the good and perfect and acceptable will of God."

SONS OF GOD

The alternative understanding of life to that of Nietzsche has been expressed for the most part in the thought and language of

Martin Buber. But it is very evident that what we have been talking about is in fact the essence of Christianity. Christianity is the supreme assertion in history that the meaning of life is found in relation, and that in Christ relation discloses its full depth of meaning and finds its perfect realisation. To the idea of the superman Christianity opposes the reality of man as son of God, living in dependence, trust, obedience, fellowship, love and joy.

"When ye pray, say, Our Father"

"God sent forth his Son that we might receive the adoption of sons."

"The earnest expectation of the creation waiteth for the revealing of the sons of God."

"Now abideth faith, hope, love, these three, and the greatest of these is love."

THE ULTIMATE CHOICE

But it is not enough to assert these things. The source of our trouble is that we have gone on affirming these truths and allowed their meaning to evaporate. They have consequently come to seem unreal. That is why Nietzsche is needed as a cleansing, tonic force. His philosophy is a philosophy that has to be *lived*. Christianity is equally the revelation of a life. "The *life* was manifested." Christ's life on earth was a proof that truly to live as a son of God demands a courage and sacrifice no less costly than that required of the superman. Are Christians prepared to follow out the logic of their belief as relentlessly as Nietzsche did of his? To dare as much? To live as dangerously? To bank everything on the faith that men were created and redeemed to live as sons of God, in daily dependence, unflinching trust and constant obedience? To believe utterly in the living Spirit, ever-present and active, the creator of community and fellowship, and in that faith fearlessly to confront and oppose the pretensions of power and the tyranny of material things?

J.H.O.

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